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[REDACTED]

TS. 185994-a

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29

27 January 1967

DRAFT

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: PROBABLE REACTIONS TO CERTAIN US ACTIONS

THE PROBLEM

To estimate the probable Communist and Free World reactions to aerial mining of North Vietnamese harbors and to subsequent air strikes against North Vietnamese airfields.

DISCUSSION

I. MINING OF HARBORS

A. Free World Reactions

1. Compared with reactions to previous US moves, there would be somewhat more alarm in the Free World over this course of action. Mining the harbors, unlike certain other US moves which have been more or less self-contained (i.e., air strikes

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on new targets) the mining of the harbors could set in train a series of possible reactions and countermeasures. No one could be sure for some time whether the US had raised the war to a far more dangerous level, perhaps involving a confrontation, with the USSR or China. And should this apprehension die down, there would be a residual of criticism against the US for blocking deliveries of non-military supplies to the people of North Vietnam and for disregarding the principle of "freedom of the seas" in peacetime. In our view, it would be difficult for the US to demonstrate in public that a substantial amount of war material (other than POL and trucks) was delivered by sea.

2. Nevertheless, we believe that no Free World country would basically alter its policy toward the US and that the Free World concern would recede, provided there was no significant escalation on the Communist side. The US action would complicate the British Government's policy of semi-support of the US in Vietnam.* As with the earlier bombing of the POL storage facilities,

* The preponderance of Free World shipping to North Vietnam is on British flag ships (50 during 1966).

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the UK would probably publicly disassociate itself from the US action. Japan would probably also disassociate itself. Elsewhere, the move would reinforce sentiments that the US was not really interested in negotiations. It is possible that some Afro-Asian countries, perhaps supported by France, would move to have the UN condemn the US action.

B. Communist Reactions

3. General. All of the Communist powers would assume that the US was embarking on a new phase of escalation. And they would generally conclude that US interest in negotiations had substantially declined. Of course, in all Communist countries, there would be a massive barrage of propaganda denouncing the US move.

4. North Vietnam. Hanoi has already begun to prepare its citizens for the possibility that its harbors will be mined. Nevertheless, the actual mining would be a jolt and would increase fears that the ultimate aim of the US was to destroy the North Vietnamese regime. There is little that Hanoi can do to counter the mining: it has no capacity to deal with the mines themselves.

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Hanoi's main concern would be to improvise alternative means by which to maintain the flow of supplies into the country, particularly war materiel.

5. The North Vietnamese leaders would probably estimate that they and their Communist allies could find ways to continue the flow of essential military and economic goods, although with far more difficulty and disruption. If the mining were effective against some or all shallow draft shipping, then the rail liner ^{and road} would have to operate at maximum capacities, and would thus be highly vulnerable to air strikes. Thus, the US action could considerably increase the problems in prosecuting the war. In the near term, however, we do not believe Hanoi would be forced to abandon the war in South Vietnam.

6. It is possible that at this point, however, Hanoi would decide a showdown was at hand and that it could not simply absorb the US moves without responding. In these circumstances, North Vietnam might attempt some highly provocative action of its own, e.g., mining in the Gulf of Tonkin, attacking a US carrier, or

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attempting an airstrike against South Vietnam. We believe that such actions are unlikely since Hanoi would probably calculate that they would only draw an even greater US reaction in response. However, it is likely that the VC would try to make a concerted effort to mine the channel into Saigon.

7. The USSR and China. The US action would come at a time when Sino-Soviet relations are particularly tense. But to offset fully the closing of North Vietnam's ports, a much greater degree of Sino-Soviet cooperation would be required. During 1966, about 120 Soviet ships delivered about ⁵⁴⁰530,000 tons of goods to North Vietnam.* If compelled to find other routes, the Soviets would be forced to obtain Peking's approval for transshipment across China. A Soviet airlift could be attempted, but the quantities of supplies that could be airlifted would be small unless staging rights could be acquired in China.

8. Though North Vietnam would insist on keeping supplies moving, the US action would probably not force any significant improvement in Sino-Soviet cooperation. China would argue that

* This was comprised of 99 dry-cargo vessels carrying 327,800 tons of supplies and 23 tankers which delivered 203,000 tons of POL (includes small amounts on dry cargo ships).

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340 —
↓
196
Total
198.2 POL

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the Soviets should confront the US on the high seas, while the USSR would counter that Chinese obstancy hindered joint efforts to support Hanoi. Thus, to some extent, politics would probably interfere with Communist efforts to offset the mining of the ports.

9. China. The present upheaval in China makes it almost impossible to predict with confidence Peking's reactions. At a minimum, China would greatly increase the amount of supplies sent to North Vietnam. There would be a heavy torrent of belligerent Chinese propaganda against the US. Beyond this, however, we note that there has been a decline in Chinese attention to all foreign affairs, including Vietnam, because of the cultural revolution. Thus, we doubt that the mining would automatically produce any significant change in Chinese policy toward Vietnam. It could be that the flow of supplies over the rail lines would be disrupted by the internal convulsions in China.

10. The USSR. The US action would confront the USSR with a more direct challenge, since the Soviets supply much of North Vietnam's economic requirement by sea (estimated at \$150 million

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last year). The Soviets would be embarrassed by their inability to prevent or counter the US move. Moreover, unless they were prepared to take new risks they would be immediately vulnerable to Chinese taunts. And, of course, the new situation would mean that all deliveries of supplies, military and civilian, would be at the sufferance of Peking, (particularly, if the moving made it too dangerous to offload shipments and small vessels.) To cover this embarrassing situation, the Soviets would resort to a considerable verbal escalation hoping to force the US to retreat.

11. But from a practical point of view the Soviets would have little choice, but to accept the situation. We assume that the Soviet experts would conclude that the mines would be too difficult to sweep and, in any case, could be easily replaced. In such circumstances we believe the USSR would not be willing to take the risk of a naval engagement with the US by bringing down the ships and aircraft that would probably be necessary to keep the sea lanes open to North Vietnam. The Soviets could use the situation as an excuse to disengage from the Vietnam war by charging Chinese obstructionism and so forth. But we doubt that this option is politically feasible. The net result, however would probably be a loss of Soviet influence in Hanoi.

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12. The Soviet Bloc would be likely to strike back at the US in their bilateral relations. Any ongoing US efforts to begin a dialogue on East-West issues would be frozen. In addition, they might recall the Soviet ambassador from Washington in a public display of anger. These possibilities would be greatly strengthened if the mining operations were carried out without warning or with some serious damage to Soviet ships. How long this freeze in US-Soviet relations would continue would depend on subsequent events.

13. Longer Term: Over a period of several months, it seems likely that supplies to North Vietnam would be reduced, particularly if air attacks on rail lines were increased. Moreover, if the mining were also effective against shallow draft shipping, then the decrease in supplies would come sooner. Eventually, Hanoi would have to sort out its priorities between vital military items and essential civilian goods. However, in our view it would probably be many months before this situation began to effect the military situation in South Vietnam. How the Communists might react at this point cannot be foreseen. Much would depend on intervening events; the status of the war, the situation in the communist world, and the US.

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II. SUBSEQUENT AIR STRIKES AGAINST AIRFIELDS

ASSUMPTIONS

- (1) The US action resulted from greatly increased air combat over North Vietnam which affected US air operations.
- (2) Initial and follow-up US strikes would be generally successful in making the airfields inoperable.

A. General Reactions

14. Free World reactions to the US bombing of airfields in North Vietnam would follow similar lines to those discussed above. If the strikes came hard on the heels of the mining action, they would be viewed by most observers as proof that the war was rapidly escalating, that the US had largely abandoned any hope for a negotiated settlement in the near term, and was intent on pursuing the war to a complete victory. Fear of a confrontation with Communist China would increase, and many countries would consider that the Vietnamese war had moved significantly closer to a Sino-US war. Pressures on the US for a unilateral suspension of all bombings in North Vietnam would grow.

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B. Communist Reactions

15. North Vietnam would attempt to defend its airfields. The North Korean pilots now in North Vietnam would enter the combat, if they had not done so already, and perhaps Soviet and Chinese pilots as well. Nevertheless, even if a substantial part of North Vietnam's air force (96 MIG-15s, and 17s, of which 32 are in China, 18 MIG-21s, and 8 IL-28s) survived the initial strikes, it would have only a limited and short-lived capability to interfere with the US attacks. Faced with the destruction of its air facilities, in any case, Hanoi might attempt a spectacular, last gasp air attack against a US base in South Vietnam or a US carrier in the Tonkin Gulf. Eventually, however, Hanoi would have no choice but to send its remaining aircraft and pilots to bases in Southern China.

16. Apart from providing sanctuary for North Vietnamese aircraft and supplies to Hanoi (both of which it is already doing), Communist China might be asked to allow North Vietnamese aircraft to operate from Chinese bases. We have previously estimated that China, recognizing the risks involved, would prohibit such action. If circumstances were normal in China

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when the assumed situation arose, we would still make such an estimate. But if the present turmoil or something like it still exists when Peking had to decide its reaction, we would be far less certain that the Chinese leaders would calculate the situation in a careful, prudent and rational manner. Certain political factions might even see an advantage in a US air attack, which could be used to rally the armed forces, though we still believe this unlikely. At the same time, if the situation in China were still so uncertain, Hanoi might not seek refuge for the remnants of its air force.

17. A compromise of sorts might be worked out to minimize the direct dangers to China. For example, fighter aircraft might return to North Vietnam if and when the airfields were repaired, and then begin some limited defensive operations. If once again forced to deploy to China, they might remain inactive for a time and return again. In this way the Communists would create a semi-sanctuary in China. The situation confronting the US would be highly ambiguous, especially if North Vietnamese pilots were interspersed with some North Koreans, Chinese, and Soviets. Though this situation is possible, we think it unlikely that the Chinese would want to slide into possible confrontation with the US in this manner.

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18. Hanoi would request and be able to obtain additional air defense equipment, SAMs and AAA, from the USSR and China. Furthermore, Hanoi would probably ask for, and China would almost certainly send, additional logistic and ~~anti-aircraft~~ troops to augment the Chinese force already there. This action and the presence of the Chinese units already in North Vietnam might be publicly announced to heighten its effect. We do not believe, however, that either Hanoi or Peking would see the desirability of introducing substantial numbers of Chinese ground combat units into North Vietnam. The Soviet Union, Cuba, and the Eastern European Communist states might be asked to send "volunteers" to aid in the defense of North Vietnam. If so, we believe they would comply with Hanoi's request.

19. The USSR. The Soviets are already heavily committed to help defend North Vietnam against air attacks, and the US action would complicate their policy problems. They would realize their limited ability to protect North Vietnam from US airstrikes. Nevertheless, they would have scant choice but to attempt to fulfill Vietnamese requests for more air defense equipment. The alternative would be to abandon Hanoi to Chinese influence

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-- an alternative the Soviets have already paid a considerable price to avoid. At this stage of the air war, the Soviets would be unlikely to agree to any overt involvement, beyond the possibility of allowing "volunteers" to go to North Vietnam. Soviet relations with the US, of course, would suffer.

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